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Dissertation on the Importance of Properly Investigating, Discriminating, and Judging, in the Practice of Medicine.

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Yale University.

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Dissertations
read by the
Candidates for Degrees and Licenses,
at the
Annual Examination,
in the
Medical Institution of Yale College,
January 19-21,
1842.

Dissertation on the Importance of
Properly
Investigating, Discriminating, & Judging
in the Practice of Medicine.

by
Horace Burr

of
Haddam Con-
Candidate for the Degree of
Doctor of Medicine - Jan - 1842

On the Importance of
Propriety.

Investigating, Discriminating, & Judging
in the Practice of Medicine.

It is of great importance to investigate closely & carefully, discriminate nicely & accurately, & judge correctly, in everything pertaining to the practice of the healing art; & upon our ability & faithfulness in the exercise of these qualities our success will mainly depend.

It is impossible for me to do justice to this subject in these few lines, & I shall only touch upon a few of the most important particulars.

In the first place as regards the prevailing general diathesis. This is not only to be observed during the prevalence of a well marked epidemic, but, where there is none, as every season, & every locality, is marked

ed by some peculiarity of diathesis, which requires, tolerates, & forbids certain remedies & modes of treatment—

Thus one epidemic, season, or locality, may require generally the antiphlogistic plan of treatment; another the reverse; another, neither, but a simple alterative plan—

In one, purgatives are among the most appropriate & useful remedies: in another there is a universal intolerance of them—

In one, the stomach will receive, & retain anything that the physician sees fit to prescribe: in another there is universally a great degree of morbid irritability & irritation, & the utmost care is necessary that the patient be not prostrated, & exhausted by continual nausea, & vomiting. In one cold applications are useful: in another stimulating & irritant frictions are required—

Thus I might specify general peculiarities, variously combined, & modified almost innumerable—

Secondly with regard to constitutional

peculiarities; as seen in the family of the patient, & to be found in his own person; such as temperament, habit, susceptibility to, medicines generally, & to particular agents.

This part of our duty is important in every point of view; but especially, in regard to the administration of medicinal agents.

A patient peculiarly susceptible, to the operation of cathartics may be dangerously purged with what will operate mildly on one of common susceptibility, & hardly at all on a, very insusceptible subject. Antiphlogistic measures, carried to an extent that will prove salutary on some constitutions, will fall short in others, while in others still they would prove fatal. A blister of ordinary strength will on the skin of some persons cause violent inflammation & sloughing. One sixteenth of a gr of opium is as efficient a dose for some persons, as two grs for others &c.

I do not pretend to say that in all cases we can come at the exact susceptibility &c. of the patient. but careful obser-

and inquiry, will direct us aright, in cases, where, if they be neglected, we shall run into troublesome, dangerous, & perhaps fatal errors. - The effects of neglecting our duty on these points, are; on the one hand, the patient is tormented, the disease aggravated, & the life destroyed - on the other the time for action is lost, & the disease progresses unchecked, untill it is too late for the remedies to produce their best effects, or, to be administered at all, & the disease lengthened, or life destroyed in consequence.

Thirdly, with regard to the particular symptoms of the case, which, together with the heretofore mentioned circumstances, determine the nature of the disease; the state of the system, as to general strength or debility; the state of the functions generally; & of particular functions.

The following are some of the errors, into which physicians are liable to fall on this point, as well as on the foregoing -

A practice of hardly examining state

but prescribing at right wit were -
Investigating so cursorily & carelessly, as to
mistake the real, nature of the symptoms,
& consequently be incapable of drawing just
conclusions - Not estimating them correctly;
attaching great importance to those of
little consequence, & perhaps entirely in-
cidental, & neglecting those of the greatest
moment - Examining with a mind preju-
diced in favor, or against, some
theory, not, a practice &c.

It is difficult to say which of
these errors is the most pernicious;
certain it is that they should all be
shunned, as pregnant with guilt to the
practitioner, & danger & death, to the pa-
tient - Every circumstance & symptom of the
case; the state of every function of the
body, should, be carefully investigated & ob-
served, in all cases, whether acute, or chronic
& that, not once or twice, but contin-
ually through the whole course of treatment
Having by a careful, judicious, & discrim-

investigation obtained the data by which
a reasonable & proper plan of treatment
may be determined on; a discriminating &
unprejudiced judgment is indispenibly
necessary to form that plan; as one misstep
at the first setting out may do more harm
than all after treatment can do good; may
render fruitless every attempt to head the dis-
ease, or be of itself the immediate or remote
cause of the death of the patient

After the plan is adopted, the proper
remedies selected, & the appropriate doses de-
cided on &c, it is equally necessary to
be vigilant, careful, & judicious; as there
is no efficient plan of treatment, nor
any active remedy that is not in most
cases capable of doing more harm than
good on the one hand; or liable to fail
of any beneficial effects on the other, if
not watched & regulated according to the
symptoms that arise, & the effects which
it produces—

No one can predicate that any plan

of treatment or any remedy, will certainly perform all that he wishes or expects on the one hand; or on the other, that it will not produce effects that he does not want; & he must be peculiarly fortunate, who can hit upon any course, that will not require many modifications -

The medical art is, not a mathematical one, our results & conclusions however carefully & judiciously arrived at, are often at best but mere approximations to truth, & liable to error on every side.

From the inscrutable, & mysterious nature of the vital operations, both in health & disease, & the agents which affect them it cannot be otherwise. Notwithstanding all our physiological, pathological, & therapeutic knowledge; our practice must be, to a certain extent, an ever-varying series of experiments, & consequently, must be, without the expense of the qualities, under consideration, more or less useless, uncertain, & dan-

In many cases we may obtain more satisfactory, unequivocal, & important knowledge of the nature of the case, ^{from the operation of remedies,} than from any other source.

In some cases medicines are found to be inappropriate although from principle and analogy they were thought to be unequivocally indicated.

Sometimes medicines do not operate kindly & beneficially though unquestionably indicated & proper in the case, on account of being given in inappropriate doses; being improperly combined, or some other incidental circumstance: in which cases if they be hastily withdrawn, without due examination, & consideration, the benefit of a useful, & perhaps indispensable agent is unnecessarily lost.

The careless practitioner is also very liable to ascribe powers to remedies that do not belong to them, & effects that are

those of some other agent, or of nature
alone; & often thinks himself remarkably
judicious, & skilful; when the truth is, that
the patient has recovered in spite
of him -

It is evident therefore that no
attainments in medicine as a science,
however high, will be of any avail
in the practice of it as an art,
without carefully investigating, discrimi-
nating, & judging, in all things connected
with it; & that the man who neglects
to do so, is but an enemy in the dis-
guise of a friend & benefactor.

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